

**Law Enforcement Technical Committee Report (LETC)
Joint Meeting
January 16, 2025
Virtual**

General Session

Members in Attendance:

Scott Pearce, FWC, Tallahassee, FL
Dean Aucoin, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Les Casterline, TPWD, Austin, TX
Patrick Carron, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Jason Downey, ADCNR, Dauphin Island, AL

Council Staff and Others:

Roy Fisher, NOAA OLE
Duane Smith, NOAA/GCES, St. Petersburg, FL
Max Birdsong, Gulf Council, Tampa, FL
John Froeschke, Gulf Council, Tampa, FL
Carrie Simmons, Gulf Council, Tampa, FL

Introductions and Adoption of Agenda – *Scott Pearce (Chair)/Les Casterline (Vice-Chair)*

Chairman Pearce called the meeting to order. Members in attendance and those participating remotely introduced themselves. A motion to adopt the agenda was approved unanimously. Minutes from the October 2023 meeting were approved unanimously.

Election of Joint Committee Chair and Vice-Chair

Les Casterline was elected as the new chair of the committee and Dean Aucoin was elected as the vice-chair.

Gulf Council LETC Items

Federal Charter Vessel ID Marking Requirements (50 CFR § 622.6) – *NOAA OLE*

NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) provided an overview of existing requirements for vessel ID number sizes and the methods by which these numbers must be displayed. Following the presentation, the committee discussed the feasibility and practicality of these regulations. A committee member highlighted the current size requirements, which mandate that vessels under 25 feet display 3-inch numbers, while those over 25 feet must display 10-inch numbers. Council staff inquired whether a middle ground could be established for vessels slightly over 25 feet, suggesting that the size transition might be too significant. However, a committee member emphasized the importance of keeping the current 3-inch and 10-inch size distinction, explaining that intermediate size intervals could complicate both compliance and enforcement.

The discussion also addressed alternative methods for displaying vessel ID numbers. One committee member proposed allowing numbers to be displayed on removable mediums, such as plexiglass, instead of being permanently affixed to the hull. Many anglers reportedly prefer not to permanently affix numbers. While federal regulations require permanent affixation, enforcement officers often exercise discretion, focusing on ensuring the numbers are visible rather than strictly enforcing the permanence requirement. It was noted that officers are currently prioritizing compliance assistance over punitive measures for this issue.

Motion: The LETC discussed various options regarding vessel ID number display requirements. The LETC believes the current Vessel ID number sizes are appropriate. The LETC would not be opposed to allowing vessel ID numbers to be displayed in a manner that is not permanently affixed.

Motion carried with no opposition.

20-Fathom Recreational Seasonal Closure for Shallow-water Grouper – Dr. John Froeschke

Council staff presented an overview of the 20-fathom closure for grouper, seeking feedback on enforcement challenges from the Law Enforcement and Technical Committee (LETC). During the discussion, a committee member noted that enforcement patrol frequency decreases the further offshore a closure is located, though some patrol activity does occur, resulting in a limited number of cases. However, specific case numbers were not provided. Another committee member highlighted the inherent difficulties in enforcing offshore closures, emphasizing that the decision on the closure's effectiveness rests with the Council, as the committee refrains from making managerial recommendations.

One significant enforcement challenge identified involves proving that fish were harvested within the closure area. A committee member explained that citations are typically based on the species found on the vessel. Anglers can claim they caught grouper outside the closure area while targeting other species within it, shifting the burden onto law enforcement to prove the location of harvest. This often requires admissions from anglers, making enforcement more complicated than simpler regulations like bag, possession, or season limits.

Council staff inquired whether maintaining the closure should involve working with mapping vendors to provide better regulatory information for fishermen which could also assist law enforcement. A committee member responded that simplifying compliance for anglers inherently makes enforcement more manageable. However, another committee member pointed out that cooperation from vendors in providing such mapping information has been a significant gap to date.

Motion: The LETC discussed the options the Council is considering regarding the possible modification of the current 20-fathom SWG closure. As the Council considers its options, the LETC would advise the Council that regulations that are linked to a specific area closure are always more difficult to enforce than simple bag, possession, and season closures, particularly when the relevant area is significantly off-shore. Nevertheless, the

LETC will continue to fully support and enforce to the best of its abilities and resource limitations, whatever management tool the Council decides is most appropriate for the conservation of the species.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Nominations for 2024 Officer/Team of the Year Award – *Dr. Max Birdsong*

Council staff reminded the LETC that it will soon be time to make nominations for the 2024 Officer/Team of the Year and described the nomination process. A committee member asked if it would be possible to nominate a team of larger than 40 officers. Council staff replied that it would be possible, but a very large team would likely not all be able to travel to receive the award.

Les Casterline, TPWD, Chair
Dean Aucoin, LDWF, Vice-Chair